Sermon for 28th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

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I suppose we all must do it now and again – dream, that is, of things eternal. It is impossible for us to sing of heaven, resurrection and eternal life, to hear these matters proclaimed in our scriptures and expounded from our pulpits without indulging in a little dreaming of what we might one day experience. We have a number of images we associate with such topics: we draw on legal imagery of a judge, a courtroom, and the concepts of being acquitted or condemned. But there are other more positive images too – and we meet one of those in today’s readings.

One of the most powerful images we find is that of a party. To be invited to come into the kingdom is not just about facing a severe judge if we don’t, but rather about joining a party. Think of some of the parables or other images in the New Testament: the party that greets the prodigal son, the church as the bride of Christ, the marriage feast of the Lamb, the eating and drinking Son of Man compared to the austere John the Baptist, the parable of the five wise virgins waiting for the bridegroom, the party to celebrate finding the lost sheep and so on.

I have a rather optimistic notion that the first thing God is going to say to me is: “Now did you enjoy that?” Only after that will he say, “Now did you behave yourself?”

Jesus speaks of himself in terms of the king who offers a wedding feast – note the royal reference – it is not just any party, but one given by a king, which together with the wedding image make this unmistakably a messianic story.

The parable refers to the way in which the Jewish people who were expected to come to the party have now refused to attend and so Jesus is calling others to take their place; it is also a reference to the heavenly messianic banquet.

Wedding receptions in many western cultures are times of feasting and joy, but they usually last only a few hours. In the Jewish world at this time, a wedding feast stretched over an entire week. The Christian faith is supposed to be Good News; it is supposed to make us joyful and eager to join in. What must God do to reach out to us, if we won’t even respond to a party invitation? Yet from the beginning, many people have preferred darkness to light (John 3:19).

Paul, who has a reputation for talking excessively about sin and suffering, actually shows that he understands the joyful nature of life in the kingdom in his exhortation to the people of Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

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The kingdom is more Franciscan-type joy than Reformed-type gloom; the kingdom should be more pull towards an attractive future, than a push away from a doom-laden alternative, but there are still certain dangers to be considered.

Some Christians have interpreted the joy of the kingdom in such extreme ways that it becomes an impediment to faith, rather than an inducement. Some have interpreted Christian joy to promote a ‘prosperity gospel’ which promises great worldly rewards and earthly pleasures. They live with feigned jollity in denial of the possibility of life kicking you in the face. Christian joy does not mean untrammelled happiness. It is about something more profound.

Wesley makes a useful distinction between *emotions* and *feelings*. Wesley believes that experience is one of the ways we know that we are God’s children. True faith is not just about believing the right things, or about worshipping in the right way, although both belief and practice are important; experience is how we encounter the Holy Spirit in our lives. God is love and we are supposed to experience that because love is real, not just an abstract theory.

This aspect of Methodist theology has often been misunderstood. Wesley is not advocating salvation by feeling; he is simply drawing on eastern orthodox tradition which speaks of *participation in the Godhead*. Wesley interprets this to mean that faith should encompass the whole person and we live our lives through our experience, so experience must be part of any genuine relationship we have with God.

Wesley defines *emotions* as the constantly rising and ebbing of our mood throughout the day, buffeted about by the triviality of the everyday matters we meet. For Wesley, the term *feelings* represent a deeper reality than emotion and always have a spiritual aspect; for Wesley *feelings* register spiritual sensations to our heart, or consciousness. The power of reason interprets the *feelings* and validates them as authentic by measuring them against scripture and tradition and by sharing them with others in the Class or Band meeting. Once so validated, *feelings* are how we recognise God’s guidance and grace. The end of this process of reflection is what Wesley means by *experience*.

Therefore we are not expected to live lives of untrammelled joy, because life itself can inflict hurt, but also God may have some stern things to say to us as well from time to time. Overall, however, the experience of God’s grace and guidance are a source of deep joy, even when we are unhappy, because even in our unhappiness, we experience our ultimate safety and consolation in the hands of God.

Julian of Norwich was alluding to this in a similar fashion to Wesley’s analysis when she proclaimed “Emotions are right naught.”

More recently, the spiritual writer Gerard Hughes has captured the profound feeling Christian joy in distinction to superficial emotion by using the image of the ballast of a ship:

The characteristic of God’s action is happiness and spiritual joy…which does not mean living on a perpetual ‘high’, but may be compared to the ballast in a ship. With ballast the ship will roll in a storm…but the storm will not capsize the boat which will quickly right itself, even when struck by a wave.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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In both the Exodus and Matthew passages we see that there are people who would rather stay out of the party.

In Exodus the Israelites are soon blaming Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, but it was not Moses, it was God. The Israelites are very quick to forget God’s part in the drama and they are about to abandon God and make themselves a god of their own in the golden calf.

They are lured away from an unseen, spiritual God and prefer a much more down-to-earth god they can make with their hands and see and touch. Such a worldly god naturally inspires them to indulge in their worldly appetites and the religious festival the next morning is followed by very worldly pleasures of eating and drinking and what is referred to as “revelry” (Ex32:6).

God may have a heavenly banquet in mind for them; he may even have a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey in store for them in the interim, but they just will not wait and prefer to take matters into their own hands and stage their own very worldly party and shape their god into a very worldly god.

This is precisely the behaviour Jesus is referring to in his parable of the king’s banquet in Matthew 22. Again, the feast being offered is no ordinary feast, if there is such a thing, but a royal feast which means that the invitation is one that should not be refused and that the banquet can be relied upon to be a lavish affair, well worth acceptance. Despite this, the various invitees in the parable find some very ordinary, worldly activities preferable to coming to the king’s party.

In various ways, those invited “make light of it” (Matthew 22:5) – one going to check his field, one to his normal business and yet others took the servants and killed them. Those rebellious and murderous invitees are then destroyed, along with their city (Matthew 22:7), before other guests are found from the street corners. This more violent version of the parable found in Matthew, compared to the version in Luke 14:16-24, may well reflect the form the parable took in the light of the crucifixion of Jesus and the later destruction of Jerusalem in the Jewish-Roman war.

The interloper mentioned in Matthew’s version who is found without the proper garment (Matthew 22:11-12) is thrown out. This is similar to the idea of those shepherds who try to enter the sheepfold from over the wall rather than through the gate, which is Jesus – a parable we find in John 10:1. There are designated ways to gain entry to the royal feast and these are to be observed. This is taken to mean that those who have “put on Christ” in baptism are the ones allowed entry, but without the re-clothing in the righteousness of Christ, we can gain no entry.

God’s invitation is to everlasting joy, but even such generosity comes with some basic rules – and that means accepting that Jesus alone extends God’s gracious invitation. We all like to think of the life to come as joyful, but fewer and fewer of us want to accept there are certain proprieties to observe on our part and would rather throw the invitation away than acknowledge them. How tragic is that? But the fault does not lie with God and his generous invitation; surely it rests with our reluctance to accept in the appropriate fashion.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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1. Gerard Hughes, *God of Surprises,* Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1985, p137. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)